



*"The sound
hung in the
air like a slow
breeze"*

Songs of a strolling blind musician

by Michael L. Gray

written in 2001 for my unpublished
book "Hanoi and the hills beyond"

The streets of Hanoi are crowded with culture, but music seems to be a strange absence from the dusty roads and markets of this congested Asian city. Around the world, itinerant street musicians are unheralded stalwarts of the urban environment. So where are they in Vietnam? The only music in the air is the sonorous calling of food hawkers and scrap metal collectors. This is a change from years past, when you could often see strolling musicians beg for money in cities like Hanoi.

Mostly men, they walked slowly down the street, head bent low, an electric guitar moaning a few pitiful notes. They plucked the strings roughly, and the sound hung in the air like a slow breeze. A harness around their neck held a mi-



crophone, bent close to their mouth. An amplifier and a battery were slung across their back, and the weight of these items kept the singers hunched over slightly, so they looked old, regardless of their age. They wore floppy cotton hats with a wide brim. You could never see their eyes. They sang slowly, with great misery, and the feedback from the poor equipment obscured their words.

The singers were always accompanied by a small boy, who carried a second hat, upturned to collect whatever handouts they received. The guitar-beggar came to a halt whenever he passed a group of people. Sitting at a tea stall or a noodle stand, someone would eventually pull out a crumpled old bill to send the man and his noisy guitar further on their way.

The music of the blind

The word *xẩm* in Vietnamese means 'wandering blind musician.' As in many

countries, music was traditionally one of the only professions available for the blind or disabled. In the past, street music – the music of the blind – was woven deeply into the social fabric of Vietnam's capital.

Troupes of blind musicians could be found in every neighborhood, as much a part of the colonial urban landscape as rickshaws and opium dens. This changed long ago, but even today, in colloquial talk, anyone singing in the street is called *hát xẩm*. Few people remember the original style of street music in Vietnam. It has gone through several periods of change, and although increasingly rare, its tune is now being carried forth by very youthful bards.

The last time I saw an old man singing in this style was in the spring of 1999. He was walking along Bach Dang Street on the far side of the Red River dyke; a

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Like a true blues musician, Cau has led a terribly hard life.

mostly poor, working-class neighborhood. I was eating a bowl of noodles when I heard from afar the wailing of an electric guitar. Down the street, still in the distance, an unassuming figure walked slowly toward me. An amp hung from his shoulder and a microphone projected his voice so it echoed off the cement walls up and down the narrow street. It sounded like a cat was dying. The singer crept past me and continued down the road, his guitar and amplified voice eventually fading behind motorbike horns and the shouts of women hawking bread and kids playing in the street. I finished my noodles in this relative calm. I didn't give the man any money.

Until I spoke the language well, I had little appreciation for Vietnamese music. The airways are full of synthesized pop, similar to Cantonese music from Hong Kong. Light and airy, the songs have predictable melodies and lyrics about love gone wrong. The singers often have beautiful voices, but in general I found that modern Vietnamese music lacked soul. That is until it dawned on me that guitar-beggars

were the bluesmen of the Red River Delta. Just like the American blues, born on the dusty roads of the Mississippi Bayou, played by blind strolling musicians.

When I made this connection, I wanted to learn more about these people, find out where they were from and what they sang about. Unfortunately, street singers were now hard to find. I often biked around Hanoi, but had not seen a single guitar-playing beggar in well over a year. Some people shook their heads and told me the singers didn't come around any more. Others, both foreigners and Vietnamese, said they still saw guitar-beggars on occasion, in the Old Quarter, or around open markets near Kim Lien. I looked for them on weekends or after work in the early evening, but after several trips around the city I had no luck.

I assumed the demise of street singers was due to police harassment or an outright ban. Concerned with presenting Hanoi as a modern Asian city, municipal authorities no doubt wanted to sweep away vestiges of the past, like blind beggars, singing or otherwise. Unfortunately, the authorities could not hope to stem

the flow of dispossessed poor coming into the city. When I first came to Hanoi in 1995, there were very few beggars roaming the streets. Now, there are many, all over the city.

When I had almost given up hope of learning more about the music, I discovered the documentary film *Xẩm*, by Bùi Thạc Chuyên. Shot in 1998, the film follows researcher Bùi Trọng Hiền to Ninh Binh province, south of Hanoi, where he meets Hà Thị Cầu, an old-school *xẩm* singer in her late 70s. Hiền aims to correct some popular misconceptions about the original *xẩm* music, which has all but disappeared. Cầu is the last surviving *xẩm* singer in all of Vietnam. And like a true blues musician, she has led a terribly hard life.

Cầu's father died when she was a child, and at 16 she married Mộc, the most famous street singer in Ninh Binh. Mộc was blind, and at 49 he was much older than Cầu. He had a long history



Folk music researcher Bui Trong Hien.

Only their extraordinary musical talent kept them alive.



Ha Thi Cau at her home in Ninh Binh province.

The music seemed wild and strange.... it brought tears to their eyes.

of enchanting women with his musical talent, and he went through these women at a rapid pace. Cầu says she was his 18th wife. The others had all fled, save one, and this woman along with Cầu joined Mọc's famous troupe of musicians. They roamed the countryside during the desperate years of the Second World War. In 1945, a famine struck and up to two million died. People ate tree bark, and sold their children so they wouldn't

starve. Mọc and Cầu kept wandering, with no possessions but their đàn bầu, a one-string zither. Only their extraordinary musical talent kept them alive. Living with Mọc was far from easy, and eventually the other wife left them.

Cầu recalls: "Mọc was a jealous man, and when he was furious he would hit people. He was even violent towards my mother. When his ex-wife died I went along with the others and buried her properly. She left because he was so brutal, but if she hadn't left Mọc and I, maybe she wouldn't have died."

As Cầu recollects these events, tears fall from her old eyes. Cầu had two daughters and a son, but gave up one girl when there was not enough food for the family. She doesn't know where the girl is today.

When the xẩm groups disbanded gradually after 1954, Cầu faded into obscurity, living in a small roadside shack in rural Ninh Binh. Eventually, word of her musical talent spread, and she began to perform again. Hiền first heard Cầu singing in 1982, when he was a teenager. "The music seemed wild and strange. My parents were originally from the countryside, and they had to travel from place to place to find work. When they heard Cầu singing, it brought tears to their eyes."

Hiền went on to study music, and he

now works at the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Art Studies, researching folk music like xẩm and chèo. When Hiền and others began to praise Cầu's music, government authorities took note. In 1991, Cầu was awarded the title 'Meritorious Artist,' the second-highest national award for artistic achievement. Cầu still sings on occasion, but her health is failing. She drinks heavily. Hiền knows that when Cầu dies, xẩm music will die with her. Cầu's children have not followed in her footsteps.

A feud between two princes

Xẩm is not directly related to the music played by guitar-beggars in Hanoi and other cities across Vietnam. It is above all the style of the blind. As Hiền says, "The blind always have their own way of expressing themselves, and they create empathy when you hear them. So in a xẩm band, there was always someone who was blind."

The music is said to originate from a feud between two princes of the late Tran dynasty, Ấc and Thiện. The king could not decide which of his sons to award the throne, so he devised a contest to select the future king. He told his sons to go to the forest and look for a precious gem. Whoever returned first would be crowned king. Thiện - which means 'loyalty' - found the gem first. Ấc - which means

'cruelty' – grew jealous and flew into a fit of rage. Drawing his sword, he cut out Thiện's eyes and left him to die in the forest.

Thiện, crawling blind through the woods, found two sticks of bamboo and began clicking them together to imitate the sound of birds, and coax the birds to bring him food. Gradually he regained his health, and he used more wood to make an instrument. After this, Thiện lived among the people and continued singing, traveling from place to place and singing about ordinary people's lives. Legends such as this – feuds between princes, or lovers – are as common as raindrops in Vietnam. A great deal of the culture is explained this way. But wandering blind musicians are not unique to Vietnam. Across the world, it seems the blind have always had a unique ability to express themselves in song. Often, the music is sad, in part because these disabled singers had no other means of employment, and needed compassion to attract an audience.

In America, the history of blues music is largely the story of poor, dispossessed and often blind black men, who sang on the streets for money. One of the most famous photographs of the Depression era in the United States is Ben Shahn's 'Blind street musician,' an intimate portrait of a black man playing a violin.

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Shahn took the photo while standing very close to the musician, and the man's eyes are shaded by the brim of his old, beat-up hat. A roll call of the earliest blues recordings of the 1920s and 30s reveals names like Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Joe Reynolds, Blind Boy Fuller and Blind Joe Death.

In Ireland, another country with a rich history of 'blues' or melancholic folk music, historian Vincent O'Brien notes, "The blind harper, the blind piper and blind composer have been so linked with labors in the service of our song that one could easily believe that national musical activity was even a prerogative of the sightless."

But when I met Hiên on a rainy morning in June 2001, he was adamant that xẩm music was not always sad, and the

singers were not beggars. They would place a bronze bowl on the ground next to them, so they could hear coins hitting the metal. As Hiên writes: "They lived off whatever people paid them, not from lifting their hands to beg. From a wider perspective, they were just like other professional artists, except their stage was out on the street."

Hiên says the word xẩm implies dark, or black, but this refers only to the sightless musicians themselves, not the theme of their songs. Some songs were happy, and many dealt with current events or scandals. "If there was an unmarried girl in the neighborhood who got pregnant, for example, they might sing about it." Hiên says the singing was often impromptu, with lyrics improvised or modified every time a tune was sung.

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and in Hanoi each group had their own area of town. There was an association that brought all the groups together, so they could exchange songs or help each other out. They even chose a leader, generally an elder who was the most talented singer. The golden era of xẩm singing was in the early 1940s, when there was a group for each of the four corners of Hoan Kiem Lake in central Hanoi.

The terrible famine of 1945 took a heavy toll on the ranks of xẩm singers across northern Vietnam, but the tradition died for good after 1954. The Communists came to power with the goal of creating a new society, and they did not want blind musicians standing on the street corners of downtown Hanoi. They decided that street music was begging, and not part of a socialist reality. The blind singers were taken off the streets

and offered education, or new types of employment. The *xẩm* groups were disbanded.

The colour of sorrow

The current style of street singing, musicians walking the streets with electric guitars, made its way to northern Vietnam after liberation in 1975. The songs were *nhạc vàng*, literally ‘yellow music’ – the color of sorrow. It was the most popular music of southern Vietnam. Times were very hard after the war, and northerners were intrigued by the gloomy, even haunting sounds of the *nhạc vàng* singers. These men were often old, and at least some were blind.

My language tutor Hằng, herself disabled, remembers: “When I was a child, in the street, whenever there was a group of *xẩm* I would always stop and listen to them. I would pay them a few hundred dong, which at that time was enough for a loaf of bread. I would listen to them for a long time. The songs were sad – always about an unhappy life – so people had compassion for them and would give them money... There was always at least one blind person in the group.”

Although these singers were not truly singing in the *xẩm* style, people in Hanoi did not create a new word to describe the post-war street singers. Very few know the true story of *xẩm* singing. In popular



The new face of street music in Hanoi.



thought, the guitar-beggars are hát xẩm, and older or middle-aged people always associate the music with hard times.

“That’s why when you say ‘xẩm’ it always has a miserable or sad connotation,” Hằng explains. ‘People say ‘oh, you look xẩm’ as a way of saying ‘you look sad’.’”

This somber reputation continues today, even though most street singers are now young, even children, who seem to be taking up guitars and microphones more for fun, as a weekend hobby, rather than any dire need to express their

sorrow. They sing modern music – even pop songs – and so opinion is divided on whether they can truly be called xẩm singers. Many who remember the hard times of the 1970s and 1980s would say no, while younger Hanoians still see them as poor countryside cousins who need their help. One young woman from a middle-class family said, “Whenever I see a xẩm, I feel regret, or pity, because they are so poor.” A woman who ran a noodle stall at Kim Lien market told me she liked the young singers: “They sing very well – hay

They sing very well - hay phet!

phết!” she says. “I always give them a few hundred dong. Most of them are poor, from the countryside.”

Hiên, the researcher, is not so sure: “People used to give money because it was good music, whereas now they give money to make the singers go away.”

The range of opinion on young street singers is, above all, a sign of the times. Hanoi is changing so fast that not everyone is able or willing to remember a distant past. Most of Hanoi’s inhabitants are too young to remember the war, let alone the end of the colonial era. So it should be no surprise that youthful singers are uncertain of their historical roots.

The kids are alright

When I finally came across a group of street singers, it was completely by accident. I was biking around downtown on a Saturday afternoon. On Ly Quoc Su, a few streets west of Hoan Kiem Lake, I passed two young men, one singing and the other playing a guitar. Two young boys tagged along, collecting money. None were blind, and they didn’t wear dark sunglasses. The guitarist had an amplifier over his shoulder, connected by a long cable to a small stereo speaker. The mi-

crophone was plugged into the amplifier, so the singer walked close alongside the guitarist. One of the boys would pick up the speaker and they would all walk a few meters down the street. He would then put down the speaker and go to collect any handouts.

I followed as they continued south down to Hai Ba Trung, a busy street lined with electronics shops. I took some photographs, and afterwards I talked briefly with the singer, Hung. He told me the guitarist, Nam, sang everyday. Hung was just hanging out with him for fun. Nam was 34 years old, and came from Thanh Hoa province to the south of Hanoi. He had two young daughters. One of the boys, Cường, was his youngest brother. Hung told me they could earn 80,000 dong (US\$5.33) on a good day, which was much more than I expected. This is much higher than the daily take of a laborer or someone selling goods on the street.

I agreed to meet them later to give them copies of the photographs I had taken. At the appointed hour I met Cường outside the Opera House. We walked back to his house, on the far side of the dyke, near my old house on Bach Dang Street. Nam wasn’t home, but when I returned

X am music, in its original form, will die with Ha Thi Cau.

the next weekend he was happy to see me and invited me inside. Cường was also there. I asked Nam if he was a ‘xăm singer’ and he immediately said yes. When I asked what ‘xăm’ meant, he said, “It means walking around on the streets and singing.” Nam thought xăm could be any type of music whatsoever. On the street he sang popular songs as well as tunes from his countryside, “Whatever I can think of,” was how he put it. He didn’t write songs himself.

Nam had been singing in Hanoi for three years, but only on weekends. He left his village in Thanh Hoa because he very quickly ran out of an audience after investing 350,000 dong (about \$25) in a guitar. Neighbors told him to try his luck in the city. Nam was adamant that I not use his real name, because he was afraid of the police. He said if he was caught singing on the streets, the police could send him to a detention center. On weekdays he went outside the city, where it was safe to sing – although he earned much less money, maybe only 10,000 dong. The weekends were safe because there were fewer police around. He said

50,000 dong was a good day – a little less than Hung’s estimate of the week before, but still a decent amount.

I didn’t expect to run into Nam again, but a few weeks later I saw Cường, his younger brother, singing on the street. The guitar looked enormous hanging on his scrawny frame. A young girl of about ten or twelve years was singing, and there was another girl holding the speaker and collecting money. I said hello and took a few photos. I got back on my bike, and after turning the corner I ran into another group of teenage street musicians. They also had a girl singing, and the boy with the guitar had a big floppy hat. There were two people collecting money, including a young man whose left foot was twisted, as if badly disabled. He hobbled around and stuck an upturned hat in people’s faces, including mine. I wasn’t sure his injury was genuine, but I gave him some money all the same.

The end of xăm music?

Hiện does not think the police ever harass street singers. He thinks there are fewer and fewer street musicians because



Sam Taylor and Hau Dinh interview Ha Thi Cau in 2004.

people care less about traditional music. Young people listen to pop or watch TV, they don’t learn songs to ply the streets for money. Xăm music, in its original form, will die with Hà Thị Cầu, who is already in her 80s. And the ‘legitimate’ guitar-beggars, older men who sang the southern nhạc vàng music, are also rapidly dwindling in number. Instead there is only a great rise in the number of beggars, without guitars or any other

instruments. More children and elderly from the countryside are sent into the city every year, as poor families cannot afford to keep them. There is no ‘culture’ surrounding this begging, as there was with the guitar players. It’s just poor people holding out their hands.

This is what many people fear as they watch Hanoi grow into a modern city. Culture replaced by a dull urban reality. This is what I saw as well, which is why I

began to research *xẩm* and look for street musicians to interview. What I found out is that *xẩm* music – the street music of the 19th and early 20th century – does not really have any modern equivalent, except the popular memory of blind musicians in the street. When *nhạc vàng* became popular in the north, blind singers adopted this music – or blind human props were adopted by roaming singers. Either way, the presence of a blind person drew attention to the groups. Times were very hard for everyone, and to invoke any pity you had to look really miserable. (My tutor Hằng, who contracted polio as a child, explains that disabled people face great prejudice in Vietnam and are often considered ‘hopeless’).

In the early 1990s, the first casualties of economic growth were those poor who could not hang onto their land, now a commodity that could be bought, sold, rented – or lost. When the number of beggars on the streets increased, to avoid the police perhaps it became less practical to employ music as a means to draw attention. Regular beggars can put their hat back on their head and sink into the crowd. It’s much harder to hide an electric guitar. And so the number of guitar-beggars began to dwindle.

Now, only the remnants of this tradition can be seen. A few adventurous young people, perhaps not all that poor,

plugging a guitar into a car battery and roaming the streets on weekends, to earn a little money for their families. Judging by Nam’s average take, this is a great weekend job. They may fake a limp, but they don’t pretend to be blind. Most people in Hanoi would see only the remnant, and they would pronounce *xẩm* dead, another casualty of economic development, another part of the culture lost. I have even come across Western writers who say they feel no need to return to Hanoi, because all its charm will soon be lost. This seems a bit narrow-minded.

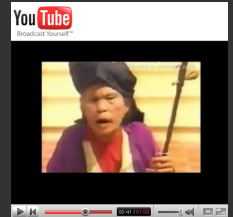
For me, all the change, inevitable or not, is what continues to make Hanoi an interesting place. And who is to say whether kids like Cương and his borrowed guitar will someday create a new story. A new type of music yet to be discovered. Something unique to this little corner of the world, where blind musicians used to walk the streets. ■

I wrote this story in 2001 for an unpublished collection of stories about my first five years in Vietnam. When I returned to live again in Hanoi in 2004, Sam Taylor invited me to join him on a trip to Ninh Binh province to interview Ha Thi Cau. Sam had seen this story on my website and wanted to do a radio feature on Cau and her music. The photos of Cau you see on these pages were taken as Sam and his colleague Hau Dinh conducted their interview.

Since writing the story it is clear that *nhac xam* has been revived or ‘renovated’ as an acceptable folk music genre, and several CDs have been produced by state music houses. Unfortunately, the music no longer exists outside the studio. There are still occasional sightings of guitar players on the streets of Hanoi, and one day in 2005 I came across a very humble-looking blind guitarist making his way slowly down Han Thuyen Street.

Cau has performed in Hanoi at least once, and a short video of her music has been posted on youtube. Below are links to stories in Vietnamese.

Bài về nhạc xẩm bằng tiếng Việt đây:
vietnamnet.vn, tntp.org.vn, thanhnien.com,
danchimviet.com.



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